

TEXT: 2 Kings 5:1-14
THEME: God works through people
SUBJECT: Ambivalence
TITLE: Managing Our Ambivalence

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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I am following Killian Noe's insightful and poignant reading of the story of Naaman.

Naaman was a highly respected commander of the armed forces in Syria in the seventh century BCE. He was accustomed to being in control, to having and exercising power. However, he had no control or power over his leprosy.

One day a young Israelite girl who worked for Naaman's wife told Mrs. Naaman about Elisha, a prophet in Israel. The king of Syria wrote a letter to the king of Israel: "I am sending to you my highly esteemed commander, Naaman, and I beg you to cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel received the letter he panicked: he tore his clothes. The king of Israel thought the king of Syria was creating a pretext for war.

When Elisha heard the king of Israel was freaking out, he told the king "Send the sick man to me." So Naaman came to Elisha with all his entourage. Elisha didn't even go out of his house to meet Naaman. He sent a servant to tell Naaman to wash seven times in the river Jordan.

The recovery plan made Naaman furious. Naaman knew he had rivers in Syria better than any river in Israel. He stormed off in a rage.

Then an amazing thing happened. One of his servants had the courage to confront Commander Naaman. It could have been costly. An angry Naaman could have lashed out at this servant and even had him killed. But this servant had the courage to hold Naaman accountable to who he said he wanted to become. Naaman said he wanted to become whole and the servant reminded Naaman of his own expressed deep longing.

The servant said, "Excuse me, Sir, but the reason we are here is because you yourself said that you want to be healed. If the prophet had asked you to do something extremely difficult, you would attempt it for the chance of being healed. So why are you so stubborn that you are not willing to follow the prophet's simple instructions?"

It is easy to imagine Naaman grumbling all the way to the muddy Jordan and to exclaim loudly after each dip in the river, "Nothing is happening! I knew this was a stupid plan and I am a fool for trusting the word of some preacher from Israel."

It is also easy to imagine the courageous servant, again doing the most loving thing, reminding Naaman of his deep longing to be healed. "Excuse me, Sir, but didn't the prophet say *seven* times?"

You have looked for healing in every other imaginable way. Nothing else has worked. What do you have to lose?”

When Naaman came up out of the river after the seventh time, he looked at his skin and it was as smooth and clean as that of a newborn baby. If it weren't for the servant's willingness to hold Naaman accountable to what he, himself, said he longed for, Naaman would have quit before the miracle happened. Naaman needed the accountability of his community in order to manage his ambivalence.

On the one hand, Naaman wanted to surrender at deeper and deeper levels to the only power that could make him whole. On the other hand, he didn't like feeling vulnerable and exposed. A part of him desired to be whole, and another part of him desired to isolate himself from others and die all alone. Without community, Naaman would have left the river before his own transformation occurred. He needed help managing his conflicting desires.

Accountability to community is essential in the management of ambivalence. If any of us are to stay in the long and painful process of transformation, we must find structures in which we are held to our commitments. Recovery from any addiction or any destructive behavior requires learning to manage our ambivalence.

Jesus made it clear that there are two cultures. The dominant, addictive culture is the wide road that most people travel. The culture of the reign of God—the way of love—is the narrow way that fewer people choose, but it leads to true life.

If we are honest, we have to admit that we don't always desire the alternative culture over the dominant culture; we don't always want to take the alternative route, the way of love.

Noe offers a three-step plan for those struggling to live in God's way of love. First, we must get honest with ourselves and with God about the fact that we are ambivalent about our desire to be vulnerable at every level to the way of love. We must get honest with ourselves about the fact that a very real part of us does not want to join our lives with an authentic faith community and does not really want others to know us or to become involved in our business.

Second, we must share these feelings with another human being. God works through people. Almost everyone is willing to admit to God in private that they have these mixed feelings, but it is much harder to admit our ambivalence to another human being, because that person is going to remind us of our desire to become whole.

When we are consumed by the desire for the destructive thing, for that which is false, we don't want to be reminded of anything that might stand in our way of acting on that destructive desire. When Naaman stormed away from Elisha's house in anger, he didn't want to hear his servant reminding him of his deeper longing to be healed. What he wanted was to feel that anger and to act out that anger in some way.

Admitting our ambivalence to another human being also means letting go our desire to protect a certain image of ourselves—an image that we think we need to protect—and admitting that we are not in control is embarrassing and difficult.

Third, having admitted to ourselves, to God and to another human being our ambivalence, we must immerse ourselves in a community of faith, the alternative culture. Freedom follows immersion in a community seeking to live out of the place where God abides, not allowing our lives to be dictated by the powerful voices of the dominant culture. Our faith community is the river we immerse ourselves in time and time again.

We keep immersing ourselves in our faith community even when we don't feel like it, even when we are discouraged, even when it seems like nothing is happening, even when we wonder how in the world these broken people are ever going to be a part of the transformation of our wounded selves—even when, deep inside, we find ourselves wondering how in the world we as a group are ever going to be a part of the loving transformation of our wounded world.

PRAYER: St Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) She spent the later part of her life tending the sick, especially during the plague that ravaged Genoa in 1497 and 1501.

“Provisional Matters”

I see the soul torn
from all spiritual things
that could give it solace
and joy. And my soul, suddenly,
has little taste for past pursuits
of intellect, or will, or memory,
and in no manner tends
more to one thing than
another. Quite still,
and in a state of siege, the *me*
within me finds itself
gradually stripped of all
that in spiritual or bodily form
gave it comfort. And once
the last of them has been
lifted clean away, the soul,
comprehending that they were
at best remedial, turns
away from them completely.